

Upper Mississippi River Basin Association

ILLINOIS. IOWA. MINNESOTA. MISSOURI. WISCONSIN

February 22, 2011

Dr. Karl Brooks
Regional Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 7
901 N. 5th Street
Kansas City, Kansas 66101

RE: Mississippi River Water Quality Collaboration and Priorities

Dear Dr. Brooks:

At the November 2010 meeting of the Upper Mississippi River Basin Association (UMRBA) Water Quality Executive Committee, Region 7's Water, Wetlands, and Pesticides Division Director Art Spratlin requested input to inform your conversations with other Regional Administrators regarding the Mississippi River. The Upper Mississippi River (UMR) states appreciate your openness to input and, even more importantly, your interest in taking a leadership role with respect to the Mississippi River. We share with EPA the goal of protecting and improving the River's water quality and offer this correspondence both specifically in response to Mr. Spratlin's request, and more generally in the spirit of ongoing state-EPA collaboration.

By way of background, UMRBA is the Governor-established forum for interstate water resource planning and management on the UMR, representing its member states of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Its Water Quality Executive Committee was chartered by the UMRBA Board in 2006, is composed of state water program administrators, and functions to address issues of Clean Water Act implementation on the UMR. As such, the comments that follow are focused primarily on the UMR, though many of these ideas have applicability for the Mississippi River as a whole.

Increasing Emphasis and Investment for the Mississippi River is Essential

Mr. Spratlin conveyed to the UMRBA Water Quality Executive Committee that your work with other Regional Administrators is intended to increase focus on the Mississippi River and raise its profile as a national priority. The states applaud your efforts in this regard and have sought the same elevation for the UMR on a number of fronts including water quality – where the Mississippi River has not received the same level of investment and effort as other nationally significant waterbodies such as the Everglades, Chesapeake Bay, or Great Lakes. We share your desire to focus attention and resources on the River and we seek to increase investment in the River and its basin without undermining current, successful programs. We further recognize that while strong state leadership is critical, the states cannot succeed alone in protecting the country's largest interstate river system. Additionally, an enhanced water quality focus is very timely given the growing interest among numerous agencies and stakeholder groups in developing a comprehensive, long term vision for the Mississippi River System.

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States Welcome Regional Administrators' Engagement and Leadership

The UMR states are quite pleased that you and your counterparts in Regions 4, 5, and 6 are taking a leadership role on the River. In your capacity as Regional Administrators, you are uniquely positioned to help develop, maintain, and advance a shared effort to improve Mississippi River water quality. This includes not only the ability to identify and allocate EPA resources, but also to engage on a regional and national scale with other key federal agencies (e.g., USDA), the states, and stakeholder groups (e.g., agricultural groups, environmental NGOs). In these capacities, the Regional Administrators can serve as the "backbone" of a comprehensive approach to protecting and improving Mississippi River water quality.

Clean Water Act-Focused Monitoring a Critical Need

While there are numerous existing data sets and several important, ongoing monitoring programs for the UMR, the states' ability to assess the River in a Clean Water Act context remains quite limited. This is in part because current UMR monitoring programs do not address the full spatial extent of the River and often are not designed for the purpose of Clean Water Act assessment. Moreover, the scale of the River, not only in terms of its physical size but also in its ecological diversity, demands a Clean Water Act monitoring program far beyond what is currently attainable for the states as they allocate limited resources between their intrastate waters and interstate waters such as the UMR.

As the states explore improvements to UMR Clean Water Act programs both individually and collectively through UMRBA, monitoring needs are becoming more apparent and well-defined. For example, UMRBA's current projects to explore aquatic life designated uses, biological assessment, and nutrients are helping the states to collectively define the "what" and "where" regarding UMR monitoring needs in terms of spatial coverage, as well as biological and nutrient-related parameters. Importantly, this monitoring is needed not only to conduct better assessments in the near term, but also to develop improved water quality standards tailored to the needs of the UMR. While the states' work thus far has benefited greatly from the efforts of programs including EPA's Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program, sufficient resources to further define and then actually implement effective, ongoing Clean Water Act-focused monitoring are simply not currently available to either the states or EPA. The UMR states seek the Regional Administrators' assistance in working to address this critical need as part of an overall effort to bring greater focus and investment to the River.

The States Seek a Shared, UMR-Focused Approach in Reducing Nutrient Impacts

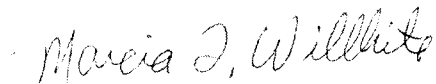
The states recognize nutrients as a major water quality issue for the Mississippi River and its basin and would like to work with the Regional Administrators in developing a framework for reducing nutrient impacts that includes shared accountability for the states and EPA, as well as other federal agencies. In particular, the states would like to work with EPA to develop a UMR-specific approach that: 1) fosters shared learning among the states and supports work within the individual states; 2) addresses "local" nutrient-related water quality issues on the UMR mainstem; 3) supports jointly held Gulf hypoxia reduction goals; and 4) encourages the success of federally-supported conservation programs and the targeting of resources to critical areas, such as is being attempted through the USDA's Mississippi River Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI).

Importantly, this approach would not interfere with or supercede the states' establishment of their own nutrient reduction strategies, but instead would help facilitate the exchange of ideas, information, and shared objectives to support these and other state-specific efforts. This approach, while most focused on goals and outcomes for reducing nutrient impacts within the UMR itself, would also be developed to work in concert with efforts of the Hypoxia Task Force and its sub-basin committees. In fact, the states are hopeful that EPA can provide assistance in carrying out the goals of the Gulf Hypoxia Action Plan by funding state nutrient reduction strategy development and encouraging creation of federal agency nutrient reduction strategies.

In pursuing a UMR approach, the states recognize that reducing nutrient impacts is not solely about setting numeric water quality criteria. A multiple-faceted approach is needed, one which addresses nonpoint and point source issues concurrently, identifies remedies for each sector in relative proportion to its contribution, and considers the cost-effectiveness of various remedies. A concerted effort must be pursued and supported to work with the agricultural community to establish best management practices in the most critical areas of priority watersheds to optimize nutrient load reduction. The states also seek to ensure that any nutrient-related water quality criteria which may be adopted are focused on the protection and support of assigned CWA designated uses, particularly those for the "local" UMR mainstem. With these perspectives in mind, the states look forward to working with EPA in a collaborative effort to reduce nutrient impacts to water quality in the UMR and its basin.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this input. We look forward to the continuation of our partnership with EPA to protect and improve water quality on the UMR and its basin. Should you or your staff have any questions, please contact me (217-782-1654) or UMRBA's Executive Director Barb Naramore (651-224-2880).

Sincerely,



Marcia T. Willhite, Chair
UMRBA Water Quality Executive Committee

cc: Susan Hedman, Regional Administrator, Region 5
Tinka Hyde, Director, Water Division, Region 5
Timothy Henry, Associate Director, Water Division, Region 5
Karen Flournoy, Deputy Director, Wetlands, Watersheds, and Pesticides Division, Region 7